

The Opinion Pages | OP-ED CONTRIBUTORS

Why Machiavelli Still Matters

By JOHN T. SCOTT and ROBERT ZARETSKY DEC. 9, 2013

FIVE hundred years ago, on Dec. 10, 1513, Niccolò Machiavelli sent a letter to his friend Francesco Vettori, describing his day spent haggling with local farmers and setting bird traps for his evening meal. A typical day for the atypical letter writer, who had changed from his mud-splattered clothes to the robes he once wore as a high official in the Florentine republic.

Toward the end of the letter Machiavelli mentions for the first time a “little work” he was writing on politics. This little work was, of course, “The Prince.”

One of the remarkable things about “The Prince” is not just what Machiavelli wrote, but that he was able to write at all. Just 10 months earlier, he endured the “strappado”: Hands tied behind his back, he was strung to a prison ceiling and repeatedly plunged to the floor.

Having at the time just been given the task of overseeing the foreign policy and defense of his native city, he was thrown out of his office when the Medici family returned to power. The new rulers suspected him of plotting against them and wanted to hear what he had to say. Machiavelli prided himself on not uttering a word.

He may well have saved his words for “The Prince,” dedicated to a member of the family who ordered his torture: Lorenzo de Medici. With the book, Machiavelli sought to persuade Lorenzo that he was a friend whose experience in politics and knowledge of the ancients made him an invaluable adviser.

History does not tell us if Lorenzo bothered to read the book. But if he did, he would have learned from his would-be friend that there are, in fact, no friends in politics.

“The Prince” is a manual for those who wish to win and keep power. The Renaissance was awash in such how-to guides, but Machiavelli’s was different. To be sure, he counsels a prince on how to act toward his enemies, using force and fraud in war. But his true novelty resides in how we should think about our friends. It is at the book’s heart, in the chapter devoted to this issue, that Machiavelli proclaims his originality.

Set aside what you would like to imagine about politics, Machiavelli writes, and instead go straight to the truth of how things really work, or what he calls the “effectual truth.” You will see that allies in politics, whether at home or abroad, are not friends.

Perhaps others had been deluded about the distinction because the same word in Italian — “amici” — is used for both concepts. Whoever imagines allies are friends, Machiavelli warns, ensures his ruin rather than his preservation.

There may be no students more in need of this insight, yet less likely to accept it, than contemporary Americans, both in and outside the government. Like the political moralizers Machiavelli aims to subvert, we still believe a leader should be virtuous: generous and merciful, honest and faithful.

Yet Machiavelli teaches that in a world where so many are not good, you must learn to be able to not be good. The virtues taught in our secular and religious schools are incompatible with the virtues one must practice to safeguard those same institutions. The power of the lion and the cleverness of the fox: These are the qualities a leader must harness to preserve the republic.

For such a leader, allies are friends when it is in their interest to be. (We can, with difficulty, accept this lesson when embodied by a Charles de Gaulle; we have even greater difficulty when it is taught by, say, Hamid Karzai.) What’s more, Machiavelli says, leaders must at times inspire fear not only in their foes but even in their allies — and even in their own ministers.

What would Machiavelli have thought when President Obama apologized for the fiasco of his health care rollout? Far from earning respect, he would say, all he received was contempt. As one of Machiavelli's favorite exemplars, Cesare Borgia, grasped, heads must sometimes roll. (Though in Borgia's case, he meant it quite literally, though he preferred slicing bodies in half and leaving them in a public square.)

Machiavelli has long been called a teacher of evil. But the author of "The Prince" never urged evil for evil's sake. The proper aim of a leader is to maintain his state (and, not incidentally, his job). Politics is an arena where following virtue often leads to the ruin of a state, whereas pursuing what appears to be vice results in security and well-being. In short, there are never easy choices, and prudence consists of knowing how to recognize the qualities of the hard decisions you face and choosing the less bad as what is the most good.

Those of us who see the world, if not in Manichaeian, at least in Hollywoodian terms, will recoil at such claims. Perhaps we are right to do so, but we would be wrong to dismiss them out of hand. If Machiavelli's teaching concerning friends and allies in politics is deeply disconcerting, it is because it goes to the bone of our religious convictions and moral conventions. This explains why he remains as reviled, but also as revered, today as he was in his own age.

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